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ABSTRACT

Communication--"real" communication--involves the hearer/reader as much as it involves the speaker/writer. This paper presents some of the ideas regarding the speaker/hearer, writer/reader, and text/meaning relationships in the work of Paul Ricoeur and Mikhail Bakhtin. The paper notes that, though neither of these men thought of themselves as rhetoricians, much of their work has been appropriated by scholars in Rhetoric and Composition Studies precisely because communication has long been a central concern for both Bakhtin and Ricoeur. It also discusses the nature of the relationship between spoken discourse and written discourse, since that relationship is of fundamental importance. The ultimate goal in the paper is to show that, even in theoretical rhetorical systems that are apparently dissimilar, the audience--the reader--is as important in the "construction" of meaning as the reader is in "conveying" meaning. The paper states that there are both differences and similarities between the ideas of Bakhtin and Ricoeur and that, at the outset, their theories will seem incompatible. It then makes an attempt to perform at least a partial synthesis between their ideas. It points to an "intersection" when the two men discuss the importance of the audience in making (as opposed to "taking") meaning from texts. By way of introducing the two theories, the paper offers a simplified "in a nutshell" explanation of to the point of contention. (Contains 14 references.) (NKA)

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Distanciation, Appropriation, and Assimilation As Hermeneutical Making of Meaning In the Work of Paul Ricoeur and Mikhail Bakhtin.

By, Michael A. McCord

CS 217 000

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Reader's of Ferdinand de Saussure's Course in General Linguistics will surely remember the diagram of the two heads that appear in his text. The diagram has been reproduced in many rhetoric and composition textbooks, and purports to show the relationship that exists between the first head (the speaker who utters a message), and the second head (the hearer of that message). While the concept of audience has always been important in rhetorical theory, the actual things that audience does in order to "receive" the message has, at least until Mikhail Bakhtin, I.A. Richards, Paul Ricoeur, and Kenneth Burke came along, received short-shrift. In short, it is probably simply the utterance, and *not* the message that the second head hears. The process by which the hearer turns that utterance into a meaningful statement is an important, though often overlooked, rhetorical concern.

For most of the past twenty-five hundred years, the audience has been discussed by philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, and by orators like Cicero, as if it passively receives messages that the skilled rhetorician controls. If rhetoric is defined not as a system for determining Truth, but, instead, as a system for the oral or written communication of ideas -- the definition I will use within the context of this paper -- then it becomes evident that the second head must actually be *doing* something aside from the passive reception of a message. Communication -- *real* communication -- involves the hearer/reader as much as it involves the speaker/writer. The audience is much more active than it has often been given credit for. The purpose of this paper is to present some of the ideas regarding the speaker/hearer, writer/reader, and text/meaning relationships in the work of Paul Ricoeur and Mikhail Bakhtin. Though neither of these men have thought of themselves as rhetoricians, much of their work has been appropriated by the scholars in Rhetoric and Composition Studies precisely because communication has long been a central concern for both Bakhtin and Ricoeur.

While my primary concern will involve written communication, I will also discuss the nature of the relationship between spoken discourse and written discourse, since that relationship is of fundamental importance. My

ultimate goal is to show that, even in theoretical rhetorical systems that are apparently dissimilar, the audience -- the reader -- is as important in the *construction* of meaning as the reader is in *conveying* meaning.

Although there are differences between the ideas of Ricoeur and Bakhtin, there are also many similarities. At the outset, their theories will seem totally incompatible, but I will attempt to perform at least a partial synthesis between the ideas of these two men. Of course, a dialectical synthesis between Ricoeur and Bakhtin's entire philosophical systems is probably not possible, or even desirable. Instead, I will point to an "intersection" that, at first glance, seems to be a point of divergence. That intersection appears when the two men discuss the importance of the audience in making (as opposed to *taking*) meaning from texts.

By way of introducing the two theories, I will offer a simplified "in a nutshell" explanation as to the point of contention. Paul Ricoeur believes that writers and readers have complete and utter autonomy from the text. In short, once a text is written, it no longer has any relationship to the man or woman who wrote it. In addition, it has no relationship to the man or woman who ultimately reads it. While this may be a difficult theory for those of us in Rhetoric or Composition Studies to accept, it is, to say the least, a *very* important idea that has obtained widespread currency in hermeneutics and in literary theory. More easy for us to accept, perhaps, is Mikhail Bakhtin's theory that all discourse -- whether spoken or written -- depends upon (in fact, is *created* by) social relationships. This remarkable social influence and system of relationships goes by the term "heteroglossia" in Bakhtin's system. Obviously, the autonomy between writer, text, and reader that Ricoeur postulates is, or at least *seems* incompatible, with Bakhtin's heteroglossia. It is, in short, difficult to see how these competing theories can "live" side-by-side in the same English Studies department.

PAUL RICOEUR

Autonomy of the text:

One of the central activities in Ricoeur's theory of the text involves an analysis of the distinction between spoken and written discourse. Ricoeur does not accept the fundamental Saussurian division between language (*langue*) as a closed, synchronic system, and individual performance (*parole*). Instead, he maintains a middle ground in

which discourse unites *langue* and *parole*. Without discourse, language remains a highly arbitrary and abstract system; it is only during a discourse event that language can become realized as meaning.

Ricoeur begins "What is a text?" by drawing distinctions between speech and writing. He acknowledges the "psychological and sociological priority of speech over writing," (146) but he also makes clear that writing involves more than a simple transcription and fixation of oral speech. Writing is not persistence of orality; instead:

> What is fixed by writing is thus a discourse which could be said, of course, but which is written precisely because it is not said. Fixation by writing takes the very place of speech, occurring at the site where speech could have emerged. This suggests that a text is really a text only when it is not restricted to transcribing an anterior speech, when instead it inscribes directly in written letters what the discourse means (Ricoeur, "What is a text?" 146).

This distinction between writing and speaking is further delineated when Ricoeur examines the speaker/hearer and writer/reader relationships. In oral dialogue, statements are made and questions are asked. Oral dialogue establishes not just a discursive, but also a temporally immediate relationship -- the speaker and the interlocutor share in the same rhetorical discourse event.

Readers and writers, on the other hand, are temporally dislocated, but, even more important than this, communication between them cannot take place:

> It does not suffice to say that reading is a dialogue with the author through his work, for the relation of the reader to the book is of a completely different nature. Dialogue is an exchange of questions and answers; there is not exchange of this sort between the writer and the reader. The writer does not respond to the reader. Rather, the book divides the act of reading into two sides, between which there is no communication. The reader is absent from the act of writing; the writer is absent from the act of reading. The text thus produces a double eclipse of the reader and the writer. It thereby replaces the relation of dialogue, which directly connects the voice of one to the hearing of the other (Ricoeur, "What is a text?" 146-147).

By separating the writer from the reader, the reader from the writer, and the text from an ostensive reference, Ricoeur radically realigns the rhetorical and dialogic relationship that is the very foundation of Bakhtin's theory of communication -- a relationship that has become extremely important in contemporary Rhetoric and Composition Studies. Ricoeur believes that:

> ...to read a book is to consider its author as already dead and the book as posthumous. For it is when the author is dead that the relation to the book becomes complete and, as it were, intact. The author can no longer respond; it only remains to read his work (Ricoeur, "What is a text?" 147).

Speech, according to Ricoeur, "has the character of a fleeting event. The event appears and disappears" (Ricoeur, "The model of the text" 198). Writing is "fixed" discourse, not in the sense that the discourse event remains, but that meaning is preserved. The "threefold autonomy of the text" (Pellauer, 104), from the writer, from the reader, and from the ostensive reference, creates a situation which is very different from that which occurs in spoken discourse:

> ...I shall say that there is a problem of interpretation because there are texts, written texts, the autonomy of which creates specific difficulties. By 'autonomy' I understand the independence of the text with respect to the intention of the author, the situation of the work and the original reader. The relevant problems are resolved in oral discourse by the kind of exchange or intercourse which we call dialogue or conversation. With written texts, discourse must speak by itself. Let us say, therefore, that there are problems of interpretation because the writing - reading relation is not a particular case of the speaking - hearing relation which we experience in the dialogical situation (Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics" 165)

Before moving to Ricoeur's concepts of distanciation, interpretation, and appropriation in the final section of this essay, it is necessary to first introduce the ideas of M. Bakhtin concerning oral and written communication. Bakhtin's conception of discourse seems, at first, to comprise a system that is antithetical to the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. This dissonance will not disappear in the analysis that will take place in the final section of this essay, but the seemingly radical incompatibility between the two systems will be substantially reduced.

MIKHAIL BAKHTIN

Oral and Written Discourse:

In Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of communication, there is little distinction between oral and written discourse. For Bakhtin, written discourse finds its origin in oral discourse; writing is speech transcribed. While Bakhtin acknowledges that there is a difference between primary (oral) and secondary (written) speech genres, it is only a difference in degree, not in kind:

> It is especially important here to draw attention to the very significant difference between primary (simple) and secondary (complex) speech genres (understood not as a functional difference). Secondary (complex) speech genres -- novels, dramas, all kinds of scientific research, major genres of commentary, and so forth - arise in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication (primarily written) that is artistic, scientific, sociopolitical, and so on. During the process of their formation, they absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communion (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 61-62).

Bakhtin makes clear that differences which exist between spoken and written communication, while significant, do not exist as functional differences. Secondary genres differ from primary genres only in that they are more complex. The process of the absorption and digestion of primary genres by secondary genres is but one of the many indications throughout Bakhtin's work that he considers writing to be transcribed speech. Here is another example in which Bakhtin asserts that secondary genres enact a "playing out" of primary genres:

> Quite frequently within the boundaries of his own utterance the speaker (or writer) raises questions, answers them himself, raises objections to his own ideas, responds to his own objections, and so on. But these phenomena are nothing more than a conventional playing out of speech communication and primary speech genres. This kind of playing out is typical of theoretical genres (in the broad sense, which would include certain kinds of scientific popularization), but other secondary genres (artistic and scholarly) also use various forms such as this to introduce primary speech genres and relations among them into the construction of the utterance (and here they are altered to a greater or lesser degree, for the

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speaking subject does not really change). Such is the nature of secondary genres (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 72-73).

According to Bakhtin, dialogue is necessary for any act of communication to occur -- in fact, dialogue is one of the constitutive elements which comprise Bakhtin's definition of communication. This holds true as much for inner speech as it does for speech with an other, or for written discourse. Like Ricoeur, Bakhtin reacts strongly against the Saussurian division between *langue* and *parole*. Bakhtin's "communication" is, in many respects, similar to Saussure's parole, since he recognizes the importance of individual performance. However, there is one consideration which displays Bakhtin's disagreement with Saussure: individuals do not have universal freedom in the ways they appropriate language in order to engage in communication. Instead, speakers and writers are constrained by the "forms of combinations of forms, that is, ...speech genres" (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 81n). For Bakhtin, no form of discourse, whether oral or written, is completely autonomous -- especially in the three areas described by Ricoeur concerning the autonomy of the text.

According to Bakhtin, the writer uses language in certain standard combinations of forms (genres) in order to elicit response from a reader:

> An actively responsive understanding of what is heard (a command, for example) can be directly realized in action (the execution of an order or command that has been understood and accepted for execution), or it can remain, for the time being, a silent responsive understanding (certain speech genres are intended exclusively for this kind of responsive understanding, for example, lyrical genres), but this is, so to speak, responsive understanding with a delayed reaction. Sooner or later what is heard and actively understood will find its response in the subsequent speech or behavior of the listener. In most cases, genres of complex cultural communication are intended precisely for this kind of actively responsive understanding with delayed action. Everything we have said here also pertains to written and read speech, with the appropriate adjustments and additions. Thus, all real and integral understanding is actively responsive, and constitutes nothing other than the initial preparatory stage of response (in whatever form it may be actualized). And the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding. He does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his own idea

> in someone else's mind. rather, he expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth (various speech genres presuppose various integral orientations and speech plans on the part of the speakers or writers) (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 68-69).

However, speech genres are not determined solely according to expectations of response. They are also determined by the subject matter, the rhetorical strategies that are employed, and the situation of the text -- considerations with which Ricoeur has already disagreed:

> The speaking person. As whom and how (i.e., in what situation) the speaking person appears. Various forms of speech authorship, from the simplest everyday utterances to large literary genres. It is customary to speak about the authorial mask, but in which utterances (speech acts) is there a face and not a mask, that is, no authorship? The form of authorship depends on the genre of the utterance. The genre in turn is determined by the subject matter, goal, and situation of the utterance (Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71" 152).

Although there are many such examples of disagreement between Bakhtin and Ricoeur, there are also many other examples which show a remarkable agreement between the theories (systems) of the two men. And, at times, what first appear to be irreconcilable features of the "opposing" systems, later turn out to contain distinct similarities. The following sections will point to three such areas.

Distanciation, Interpretation/Understanding, Appropriation

At the beginning of this section, it is necessary to say a few words about the dialogue which will here be established between Ricoeur and Bakhtin. Although there are many points at which Ricoeur and Bakhtin's ideas intersect, they rarely use the same terminology. Thus, while Ricoeur speaks of distanciation," Bakhtin embraces similar ideas with words like "alienation" and "outsidedness," ("exotopy," by some translators). Ricoeur's "interpretation," though used occasionally by Bakhtin, is more often "understanding" in Bakhtin's work. For Ricoeur's "appropriation," Bakhtin would substitute "assimilation." The use of different words to signify similar ideas might be attributed to the different national languages -- French for Ricoeur, Russian for Bakhtin -- but it may have as much to do with the choices made by translators. To further complicate matters, a word like

"understanding," for Ricoeur means something quite different from "interpretation," its frequent meaning in Bakhtin. It is interesting to note that this polysemic nature of words, besides leading to some "rough edges" in this essay, is a consideration of great importance for both Ricoeur and Bakhtin.

Ricoeur's "Distanciation"/Bakhtin's "Outsidedness"

For Ricoeur, distanciation is alienation, but not in a negative sense. It is a required element in our participation in interpretation. Ricoeur posits a cultural and temporal distanciation between writers and readers; as such, it is this very distanciation which requires us - as we write and as we read - to engage in interpretation. It is distanciation which helps to insure the autonomy of the text. Distanciation:

> ...is not the product of our methodology and therefore is not something added and parasitic, rather it is constitutive of the phenomenon of the text as written Ricoeur, "The hermeneutical function of distanciation" 133).

Thus, distanciation:

> ...helps to preserve the text from the perishing of the moment. But in so doing it also decontextualizes the text from its original setting. This decontextualization, in turn, becomes a condition for all subsequent interpretation for in preserving the text it also keeps it open for new interpretations. In other words, it makes possible the subsequent recontextualization of its message (Pellauer, "The Significance of the Text" 107).

But, this recontextualization also requires "The distanciation of the subject from himself," in the act of interpretation. Finally, appropriation will make clear that "the text is the mediation by which we understand ourselves" (Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" 141).

Ricoeur's concept of distanciation is not very different from Bakhtin's ideas concerning outsidedness. Ricoeur and Bakhtin agree that distanciation/outsidedness is potential in spoken discourse, and they agree that such elements of spoken discourse as gesture, intonation, and genre selection help to reduce distanciation/outsidedness. Furthermore, neither man believes that distanciation/outsidedness has a negative impact on the rhetoric of written

discourse, but is necessary for interpretation/understanding. If there is a disagreement, it is one only of degree. Bakhtin writes:

> The first task is to understand the work as the author himself understood it, without exceeding the limits of his understanding. This is a very difficult problem and usually requires introducing an immense amount of material. The second task is to take advantage of one's own position of temporal and cultural outsidedness. Inclusion of our (other's for the author) context (Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71" 144).

The previous quotation makes clear that Bakhtin endorses the importance of outsidedness, but for what purpose? The following lines will make clear that Bakhtin also sees the need for outsidedness as a preliminary act to understanding:

> In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding - in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are others. In the realm of culture, outsidedness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly (but not maximally fully, because there will be cultures that see and understand even more). A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning; they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures (Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from Novy Mir Editorial Staff" 7).

Interpretation/Understanding

For Ricoeur and Bakhtin, distanciation/outsidedness must take place before interpretation can begin. In addition, both men believe structural and linguistic interpretations are valid, but not as ends in themselves, and certainly not as methods for communication and the interpretation of meaning. For both Ricoeur and Bakhtin, there are levels of interpretation that are more important:

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> Reading is like the execution of a musical score; it marks the realization, the enactment, of the semantic possibilities of the text. This final feature is the most important because it is the condition of the other two (that is, of overcoming cultural distance and of fusing textual interpretation with self-interpretation). Indeed, the feature of realization discloses a decisive aspect of reading, namely that it fulfills the discourse of the text in a dimension similar to that of speech. What is retained here from the notion of speech is not the fact that it is uttered but that it is an event, an instance of discourse, as Benveniste says. The sentences of a text signify here and now. The 'actualized' text finds a surrounding and an audience; it resumes the referential movement - intercepted and suspended - towards a world and towards subjects. This world is that of the reader, this subject is the reader himself. In interpretation, we shall say, reading becomes like speech. I do not say 'becomes speech', for reading is never equivalent to a spoken exchange, a dialogue. But reading culminates in a concrete act which is related to the text as speech is related to discourse, namely as event and instance of discourse. Initially the text had only a sense, that is, internal relations or a structure; now it has a meaning, that is, a realization in the discourse of the reading subject. By virtue of its sense, the text had only a semiological dimension; now it has, by virtue of its meaning, a semantic dimension (Ricoeur, "What is a text?" 159).

This quotation introduces the idea that texts have the ability to direct the reader, through interpretation, to a textually-inspired self-understanding. The rhetorical expertise on the part of the writer is important, but the reader must actively reconstruct the text for him or herself. Ricoeur makes this idea more clear when he writes:

> [T]he intended meaning of the text is not essentially the presumed intention of the author, the lived experience of the writer, but rather what the text means for whoever complies with its injunction...to interpret is to follow the path of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself en route towards the orient of the text (Ricoeur, "What is a text?" 161-162).

Bakhtin believes that understanding is inspired partly by the text, and partly by the context or position of the reader:

> Understanding cannot be separated from evaluation; they are simultaneous and constitute a unified integral act. The person who understands approaches the work with his own already formed world view,

from his own viewpoint, from his own position. These positions determine his evaluation to a certain degree, but they themselves do not always stay the same. They are influenced by the artwork, which always introduces something new (Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71" 142).

What is of interest here involves the fact that, while Ricoeur seems to maintain an antagonistic stance against the idea of intertextuality or intersubjectivity, or any form of dialogue between author and reader, a self-understanding which is inspired -- at least in part -- by the text is a central part of his philosophy of the text. This is not far removed from Bakhtin's position. In addition, Bakhtin realizes that understanding a text involves much more than determining an absolute authorial intent. Reading always involves the mixing of self with a different, but equal, other:

> Contextual meaning is potentially infinite, but it can only be actualized when accompanied by another (other's) meaning, if only by a question in the inner speech of the one who understands. Each time it must be accompanied by another contextual meaning in order to reveal new aspects of its own infinite nature (just as the word reveals its meanings only in context). Actual contextual meaning inheres not in one (single) meaning, but only in two meanings that meet and accompany one another. There can be no "contextual meaning in and of itself" - it exists only for another contextual meaning, that is, it exists only in conjunction with it (Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71" 145-146).

Appropriation/Assimilation

This is the definition of "appropriation" provided by Ricoeur in "What is a text?":

> By 'appropriation', I understand this: that the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself. This culmination of the understanding of a text in self-understanding is characteristic of the kind of reflective philosophy which, on various occasions, I have called 'concrete reflection'... One of the aims of all hermeneutics is to struggle against cultural distance. This struggle can be understood in purely temporal terms as a struggle against secular estrangement, or in more genuinely

> hermeneutical terms as a struggle against the estrangement from meaning itself, that is, from the system of values upon which the text is based. In this sense, interpretation 'brings together', 'equalizes', renders 'contemporary and similar', thus genuinely making one's own what was initially alien (Ricoeur, "What is a text" 158-159).

Although Ricoeur maintains his stance against dialogue between writer and reader, the hermeneutical function of "making one's own what was initially alien" is precisely what Bakhtin argues for. The difference, at this point, is that Ricoeur does not accept textual meaning as a function of authorial intention, but, instead, as an aspect of the "world" that is created by the text. If distanciation is a crucial element in the act of interpretation, so, also, is the act of appropriation. The structure of meaning which resides in the text is far more involved than any linguistic analysis can reveal.

For Ricoeur, discourse is created, not by the reader, but by the text itself. The reader is shaped by the dynamic of the text. Ricoeur's "horizon" of the text is not a creation of the author or the reader, it is the fusion of two separate discourses: the discourse of the text and the new discourse of the reader. Through appropriation, the reader takes up "a new dwelling in the worlds of the text. Both (the reader's) situation and the mute text are transgressed and interlinked" (Van Den Hengel 202). The reader brings an entirely new element -- his or her participation -- to the world of the text.

Bakhtin's conception of the text, and the relations between the author and reader, is, perhaps, more traditional than that offered by Ricoeur. For Bakhtin, assimilation depends on a strong relationship between the writer, the reader, and the text:

> ...the formal meaning of its (the text's) elements...is in principle accessible to any individual consciousness. But its evaluative - semantic aspect... is meaningful only to individuals who are related by some common conditions of life...in the final analysis, by the bonds of brotherhood on a high level. Here we have assimilation and, at higher stages, assimilation to higher value...(Bakhtin, "Methodology for the Human Sciences 166).

While Ricoeur believes "the meaning of a text is open to anyone who can read" (Ricoeur, "Appropriation" 192), and would agree with the first part of Bakhtin's statement, he would strongly disagree with Bakhtin's notion that writers and readers must be related by certain common conditions. Ricoeur believes that textual meaning can be appropriated precisely because the text has escaped its original context and temporal location. Note however, that if the "common conditions" are restricted to the text, Ricoeur would likely agree with Bakhtin. This does seem unlikely, however, since Bakhtin frequently discusses the dialogic relations that exist between author and reader through the text.

This disagreement is a reasonable one, however, and has still not been resolved by contemporary Rhetoric and Composition scholars or philosophers of language. I tend to believe that both systems have usefulness. When I read my own student papers, I am able to understand the "connections" that Bakhtin would say exist between those writers, their texts, and myself. There is much about that relationship that is very dialogic, in the sense that, though I am reading a written text, the production of that text took place within a limited temporal and spatial sphere. However, when I am reading texts by authors I have never met, written during times I have never known, and in places I have never seen, there is something about Ricoeur's analysis that rings true for me. Perhaps I do make meaning in these cases precisely because I am outside of that writer's text, outside of his or her imagination.

Ultimately, there is no way to completely reconcile Ricoeur's philosophy of language and the text with Bakhtin's -- nor is such a reconciliation desirable. However, it is necessary to recognize similarities when they do appear, since the points of intersection might lead to a more thorough understanding of what takes place when a writer writes, and a reader reads. The important point to remember is that, in the rhetorical models of both Bakhtin and Ricoeur, audience has an absolutely central function. Meaning is not simply "grasped," according to Bakhtin and Ricoeur -- it develops within the reader based upon the various contexts of the author, the text, and the reader.

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